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SUBJECT: THE FEDERAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN ATLANTIC CANADA: IS THE REGION UP FOR GRABS?

[11](#). SUMMARY: With the Liberals and Conservatives neck-to-neck in Atlantic Canada, election-watchers are pointing to the large number of undecided voters as key to whether the Liberals are able to hold onto their grip in the region. U.S. interests in the campaign revolve around promised increases in military spending and a proposed LNG plant in Maine. END SUMMARY.

PREDICTIONS: WILL ATLANTIC CANADIANS FOLLOW THE NATIONAL LEAD?

[12](#). With Conservative momentum building across Canada, the big question in the Atlantic Provinces is whether this same momentum is carrying through here and whether it will fully hit the region before election day. Recent polling data shows the race tightening significantly between the two major contenders: the Liberals and the Conservatives. Taking in the margin of error in a new poll conducted by a major regional firm, the Liberals and the Conservatives are within striking distance of each other. In the 2004 election the Liberals took 22 of the region's 32 seats to the Conservatives' 7 and the NDP's 3. Now poll results indicate the Conservatives could make significant gains on January 23.

[13](#). At the outset of the campaign all indications were that the Liberals would maintain their hold on the region. Polls showed the Liberals with 50 percent support, while the Conservatives trailed with 28 percent. Since that time the Conservatives have risen 8 percentage points to 36%, while the Liberals have dipped 9 points to 41%. Adjusting for the margin of error, this leaves both parties at an almost statistical tie. (The NDP have remained consistent throughout the campaign at approximately 20% of popular support.) The big dilemma in predicting whether the region has jumped on the Conservative bandwagon is the high number of undecided voters, between 16-27%. This could present a significant shift to either party in the final days of the campaign.

[14](#). Against this background, the momentum nationally and the tightening of the polls locally, it would not be difficult to project the Conservatives picking up seats in the Atlantic area. If current trends hold, the Liberals would be reduced to 15 seats from their 22, the Conservatives gaining 7 to give them 14 seats, and the NDP keeping their 3 (with the possibility of a fourth should the NDP win in a tough battle in a metro Halifax riding).

THE CAMPAIGN: THE LIBERALS VERSUS THE CONSERVATIVES

[15](#). Campaigning Liberals have been touting their record in Atlantic Canada, saying that the region has gained much from successive Liberal governments. They also warn that the region could see these gains erode should the Conservatives take power.

As for the Conservatives themselves, they are finding that voters are hesitant to fully embrace leader Stephen Harper and his team. Despite this hesitancy, the national 'need for change' factor is fueling the Conservative momentum in the region and has narrowed the gap between the two parties.

[16](#). Also, the length of the campaign has allowed Mr. Harper to travel to the region more frequently than he did in 2004 when voters were far from receptive. He and his party strategists have fought a more focused campaign than in 2004 then when they came across as a Western dominated, fractured party, newly created and largely unorganized in the region.

THE NDP: NO TRACTION

[17](#). Polls show the NDP has not broken any new ground in the region and will likely retain their current three seats. In an effort to increase the profile of NDP candidates, national leader Jack Layton has visited the region several times during the campaign. Despite his attention, the party appears to have failed to gain much ground since 2004 and there are no indications that it will move out of its traditional third place slot.

U.S. ISSUES AND OTHER CAMPAIGN THEMES

[18](#). U.S. issues in this campaign have been the Conservative promise to increase military spending, including the expansion of military bases in the region. Also of U.S. interest is the

ongoing issue of a proposed liquefied natural gas plant in northern Maine. Mr. Harper has reconfirmed a Conservative party's commitment to deny U.S. vessels passage through Canadian waters to reach the proposed plant. Apart from these bilateral issues all three party leaders have visited the region and have mainly promoted their national party agendas without reference to the U.S. Local issues have also received the requisite attention from leaders but have failed to grab much attention.

HIGHLIGHTED RACES

9. As elsewhere in the country, there is no shortage of interesting contests. Looking at the cabinet ministers up for re-election, Aboriginal Affairs Minister Andy Scott campaigning in his Fredericton New Brunswick riding is in definite danger of losing his seat, as is his Nova Scotia colleague, Public Works Minister Scott Brison. On the other hand, Nova Scotia's other cabinet representative, Fisheries and Oceans Minister Geoff Regan, will likely be back with little difficulty due to his personal popularity. The same applies to Prince Edward Island's Joseph McGuire, Minister for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency. Another high profile race is in the Halifax riding where NDP Foreign Affairs critic and former party leader Alexa McDonough is facing a tight three-way race. Her campaign manager told the Consulate's political intern, "Alexa is fighting for her political career in this election." Nevertheless, she faces relatively unknown challengers and the Liberal and Conservatives do not seem to be making a major effort to unseat her, in contrast to 2004 when she faced a popular Regional Council member who ran an energetic and well-financed campaign.

COMMENT

10. This long campaign has boiled down to one key theme: Are Atlantic Canadians prepared to embrace the concept of a change in government by voting Conservative? The polls have not been as overwhelming for the Harper Team as they have been nationally, but observers note Mr. Harper has made definite strides in wooing voters away from the Liberals. As we noted in our reporting on the 2004 election, when voters here actually meet the Conservative leader or hear him speak in person their fear of him and his policies seems to diminish. Overall, the answer to the question of whether Mr. Harper can rely on Atlantic Canadians to help him form a government lies in just how these undecided -- but crucial -- voters mark their ballots.

END COMMENT.
HILL